

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

John: Welcome to EPA Region 2's podcasts, a series of conversations about environmental issues in New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and the seven tribal nations in those areas. I'm John Senn of the Region's Public Affairs Division. One issue central to EPA's mission is responding to situations involving hazardous chemicals and materials. Today we'll be talking about one of these situations EPA recently dealt with in New Jersey. Today I'm joined by the two EPA on-scene coordinators who worked on the situation Mike Brescio and Mike Solecki. Good morning guys. So can you give us an overview of the situation, how EPA became involved, and what we had to deal with there?

Mike: On August 2nd, in North Brunswick, New Jersey, the police department actually got a call for a missing persons. There's an elderly couple and the wife called stating that she couldn't find her husband basically. When the police arrived, they did a search of the house, we're talking these couples are in their early eighties, so when the police were going through the house they discovered numerous containers of chemicals. So they immediately backed out of the house, they called the local hazmat company who came out, who immediately called the state. The state did some investigation and then that evening, it was a Saturday night, they called the EPA Hotline since we do have a twenty-four hour, seven day a week response team. Monday morning, we had two responders from the weekly response team go out to the house. They did a site survey which, about an hour later, they came back and basically said the DEP wanted us to handle the site. At that point the new weekly team assigned went out there, which was myself, and yes, we had a very hazardous incident on our hands, so we immediately activated our response contractor. And we started on August 5th to do the actual stabilization of the house. During the initial assessment we discovered, right on the shelves, picric acid which was starting to crystallize. That was one of our immediate chemical threats, but we also had electrical hazards in the house, the electrical system was very old it was still the old fuse and knob type electric in the house and there were extension cords that were just hardwired into junction boxes. The electrical company, PSEG, came in they immediately shut the power off, we had to restore power so we could work in there, we didn't want to have generators running twenty-four-seven in a residential neighborhood.

John: And what is picric acid? What's it used for?

Mike: There's many uses for it. Building explosives is one of them, but it also can be used as a cleaner. It's safe when you can handle it and it's safe when it's not crystallized. The friction alone of turning the cap on the jar could detonate it, that's how sensitive this stuff is. That's what they call it this time a "shock sensitive" material. So at that time we called in the New Jersey State Bomb Squad which they came in with their hazardous material teams also. Between them and ourselves, we came up with a plan to remove picric and any other crystallized material that was going to cause another explosion threat. It was determined that we would just remove the picric. At that time we came up with the plan, we came up with the location and a week later the state police actually removed about three and a half pounds, five jars, of the picric. There was enough picric in the house with the other chemicals that would have, if it did detonate, it would have leveled that house and along probably the two houses next to it.

Mike: It wasn't just a problem with the picnic, it was the other things that were involved too. There was phosphorous which would have acted as an incendiary. And there was, I don't even know how many pounds of ammonium nitrate, not to mention the pesticide-type chemicals that could actually put toxic fumes in the air. There was chemicals they used like in rocket fuel. We're not sure how she got hold of all this stuff. It's an assumption but we're believing that she bought chemicals in bulk from people who were getting rid of chemicals because she had her own little business running in the house, prior to retirement, and she made perfumes, pesticides, and, believe it or not, vitamins.

John: Right, so the substances that you guys found weren't necessarily uncommon, or even illegal.

Mike: Her categorization process was not exactly up to par either. She put everything in alphabetical order which, that means you're putting explosives next to incendiaries next to toxics next to, ya know, and they're all right there in the same vicinity with each other rather than putting oxidizers over here, explosives over there and so on. They're all just jumbled up on the shelves.

Mike: What was scary was when we met the nephew, who was actually the legal guardian, he told us that he was going to go down and start just throwing these chemicals out. He was not aware of the hazards these were presenting because some of these chemicals had expiration dates in the late 50's, when we were looking at the labels. The newspapers that they were stored on the shelves were from the 70's, so it just tells you how long these things had been sitting, going through a cold, warm cycle, and the moisture down in the basement. We found them out in the shed. We found them in the garage. We found them in their bedrooms, their bathrooms. So that was one of the issues, we just kept discovering more and more and more and more. The final count was over 2,500 containers.

John: But obviously we were able to avoid any kind of situation here and it was a success story. So can one of you guys speak to kind of the process of how we started alerting the community, and working with the community, and making sure that, you know, everything got handled?

Mike: With the community, Pat Seppi, she's one of our community reps, a great person, can't speak enough about her, she actually went door-to-door the first night we discovered we had the incident there. She alerted the individuals within a 500 foot radius. She went door-to-door. First Thursday, we started to work out there Tuesday, the first Thursday we were there, we actually had a town meeting with the Mayor, with the local Office of Emergency Management, police, and there was about 25 residents that showed up. So the communication was always there from the second day that we were out there. And then when we were doing the detonation and the removing of the chemicals, again, a door-to-door notification went out asking the people to evacuate. We also got everybody's cell number, and we called them once the area was safe that the people could return back home because it actually was a couple hours earlier than what

we expected. So the communication was day one, day two, door-to-door, not once, but twice. We had cell numbers. We had a flier that went out. And we had a town meeting. It couldn't have worked any better.

John: So, now cleanup's wrapped up on the site and it actually, the whole process took a shorter amount of time than you guys expected it would, right?

Mike: We planned on probably a two month activity there but with the cooperation of our contractors, we were working ten, twelve, fourteen hour days. The first three weeks we worked non-stop through the weekends. Because we were in a residential area we wanted to get it done as quickly as possible. Even though those time frames were calculated with the initial estimate of work, we finished it a lot earlier.

John: And another big part of the success story is the cooperation with state and local authorities, right?

Mike: Yes. That was our biggest victory I guess. The way we worked with everybody, sometimes when you're working with state or local officials sometimes they will get to the point where, "this is in my backyard, this is how we want to do it," but in this case it was, "this isn't my backyard, you guys are the professionals, we are here to help you." And our opinion as EPA was, "yes, we want to help you guys too." So everybody worked together. Everybody was on the same plane. Everybody had an input, it just went like clockwork.

John: And you mentioned also, a little earlier, the emergency response hotline and that it kind of helped move things along in the beginning of the situation

Mike: EPA is manned twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week in Edison. After normal working hours we do have a hotline that comes through the national response center down in Washington D.C. That worked well because we got personnel lined up ready to go so there was no delay in us responding to the site once we got it referred to us from the state DEP.

John: What's the number for the hotline?

Mike: 1-800-424-8802.

John: And also there's more information on our website it's epa.gov/region2. Well that's about all the time for today. I want to thank Mike Brescio and Mike Solecki, two of our on-scene coordinators here in EPA Region 2 for talking to us today about this interesting and unique emergency response situation. Again, my name's John Senn, I'm in EPA Region 2's Public Affairs Division. Thanks for joining us. And for more information please visit epa.gov/region2.